

# A part of society

Refugees and asylum seekers volunteering in the UK

**A report based on case studies of ten organisations**

**by Ruth Wilson and Hannah Lewis**



**“I don’t want to be apart from society – I want to be part of it.”**

Zhila, volunteer, Maryhill Citizens Advice Bureau

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### **Ruth Wilson**

Volunteering and Asylum Project/tandem

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## The ten case study organisations

Activenture, South East England	42
BTCV (formerly British Trust for Conservation Volunteers), Scotland	47
Irish Community Centre, Manchester	53
Maryhill CAB, Glasgow	57
Nomad, South Yorkshire	61
Oxfam shops , London and Leeds	64
Rosemount Lifelong Learning, Glasgow	68
School governors, Bristol, London and South Tyneside	72
Volunteer Centre Westminster, London	78
Whitchurch hospital, Cardiff and Vale NHS Trust, Wales	82

## The intermediary organisations

Organisations that have helped the case study organisations to involve refugees and asylum seekers as volunteers.

Back to Work Company, Leeds	66
Camden Language and Support Service, London	75
Displaced People in Action, Cardiff	84
Refugee Action, Manchester	55
The Parade ESOL Service, Cardiff	85
Volunteer Centre Sheffield	63
West Thames College, Hounslow	44
Volunteer Centre Westminster Refugee Project, London	80

See also: [Building networks in Glasgow, Section 3.3, page 37.](#)

# Summary and recommendations

“I came here to save my life.  
So now I want to help people of this country.”

Annie, volunteer, Whitchurch hospital

## Background

Many refugees and people seeking asylum volunteer. Most do so within their community, or as part of a refugee organisation they know and trust. This volunteering has great value.

Far fewer go on to volunteer in other, non-refugee organisations, and yet such volunteering is likely to have many benefits – for the volunteers, for the organisations that take them on, and for the communities or clients they serve.

The Volunteering and Asylum Project therefore set out to explore case studies where three or more refugees or people seeking asylum were volunteering in a ‘non-refugee’ organisation, to learn from their experience about challenges and benefits. We visited ten organisations, each with a different focus and based in different parts of the UK, to talk to volunteers, staff and managers.

In all cases, at least one outside organisation had played an important role in helping refugees and people seeking asylum get involved, and wherever possible we interviewed these intermediaries as well.

This report is an account of the ten case studies and our main findings. We hope it will inspire and help policy makers, volunteer managers and a wide range of organisations to do more to enable refugees and people seeking asylum to take part in high quality volunteering opportunities across the UK.

“Because of having more clients and volunteers who are refugees and asylum seekers we were able to challenge the way they are represented in the community and in the media.”

Jean Cheyne, Manager, Maryhill CAB

## Main findings and recommendations

Interviewees – whether staff, managers or volunteers – saw volunteering by refugees and asylum seekers into non-refugee organisations as an overwhelmingly positive experience, bringing many benefits.

There were also challenges, at different levels – individual, organisational, social and political. Although people seeking asylum are allowed to volunteer, the asylum system in itself can make life

precarious and difficult for asylum seekers, and therefore can put people off taking the extra step of volunteering outside the refugee sector. However, it was felt widely that ‘mainstream’ volunteering promoted integration, whether or not the volunteer had received a decision on their asylum claim.

The following ways forward, therefore, support the further development of this area of volunteering.

### Raising awareness among refugees and people seeking asylum

It is apparent that many refugees and people seeking asylum are not aware of the diversity of volunteering opportunities in the UK, or that volunteering is open to them and has value. Organisations recruiting volunteers need to reach this audience, and be clear and realistic about what is on offer – roles, training, support, possible benefits.

- 1. More work needs to be done to promote awareness of volunteering as a worthwhile and legal option for refugees and people seeking asylum, through a range of organisations and media. Government needs to reinforce this message, in part through emphasising the difference between volunteering and unpaid work/unpaid employment.**

### Raising awareness among organisations

Our experience of searching for case studies suggests that many volunteer managers and intermediary agencies are not aware of refugees and people seeking asylum as potential volunteers or of how to reach them. Others may be put off by a range of barriers, some of which have more to do with perception than reality.

- 2. More must be done to enable a wide range of volunteering and intermediary organisations to include refugees and people seeking asylum as volunteers. This should include funding to increase capacity and build diversity, and the dissemination of information about refugee issues.**

Overall, a strong organisational commitment to equal opportunities and diversity, and clear leadership from senior management on this and volunteering, helped organisations be successful in involving refugees and people seeking asylum.

### Criminal Records Bureau checks

Asylum seekers and refugees can go through a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check at any stage, but issues relating to identification papers or changes of address can sometimes put organisations and individuals off.

- Difficulties around Criminal Records Bureau checks need to be resolved through a further review of CRB-accepted identification documents. At the same time, other forms of risk management should be promoted.**

The volunteers were keen to learn about life in the UK and wanted to feel part of society. For many, volunteering was their only opportunity to mix with and work alongside British people.

- Integration is a two way process, requiring flexibility and change on the part of organisations and individuals. This needs to be acknowledged by funders, policy makers and volunteering organisations.**

“The idea of preparing someone for volunteering is great. It would help if there were more introductory courses for vulnerable people.”

Paul Harvey, Asylum Seeker and Refugee Worker, Volunteer Centre Sheffield

### Supporting the pioneering volunteer

Many of the volunteers we interviewed had deliberately sought out volunteering experiences where they would be surrounded by people speaking English, and where often they were unlikely to meet other refugees. They did so for a number of reasons: to rebuild their careers, to improve their English, to understand and be of service to the host community and to be active.

This takes courage, persistence and adaptability. At this stage, these volunteers are pioneers. Many do not want to be made a special case, but others see themselves as ambassadors, wanting to show that people who seek asylum are not scroungers, and wanting to encourage other refugees and asylum seekers into volunteering.

Such volunteers offer a huge amount to British society. Their support and development is key to enabling organisations to become more diverse and to encouraging other excluded groups to consider volunteering.

- Organisations need to develop strategies to ensure that pioneering volunteers are welcomed and supported, and that their outreach role is acknowledged.**

### Tools for integration

Organisations and volunteers often saw the involvement of refugees and people seeking asylum in non-refugee organisations as a tool for integration. The organisations were interested in adapting their policies and practices to ensure that they welcomed and supported volunteers from different backgrounds. They often invested time in building external networks, gathering information, and providing support to individual volunteers.

### Adequate resourcing

Our case studies show that though additional funding is not essential to building diversity, when available it is a significant benefit. However, sometimes funding excludes particular groups, such as asylum seekers, and this was found to be detrimental to organisations' overall commitment to equality.

- Volunteer management requires resources: funding needs to be available to enable targeted initiatives and the building of diversity. Such support should not exclude particular groups, such as asylum seekers. At the same time, organisations must work to ensure diversity and inclusion are central to how they work so they involve a variety of volunteers whether or not additional funding is available.**

### The volunteer co-ordinator as agent for diversity and inclusion

It was clear from the case studies that volunteer managers play a key role, either in implementing a whole-organisation approach to equality and diversity, or in introducing new levels of diversity through volunteering.

Volunteer co-ordinators were often fulfilling a variety of roles: volunteer management, awareness-raising within their organisation, devising new volunteering opportunities and overcoming barriers. Many said they benefited from having the time to include outreach work and to participate in networks and external events. However, sometimes volunteering was perceived within organisations as an ‘add-on’, and its core role in promoting diversity and inclusion was not

always understood. Leadership from senior managers was often key to overcoming this.

- 7. The importance of the role of the volunteer manager or co-ordinator in building diversity, and the range of responsibilities it carries, need to be acknowledged by senior management within organisations, and by funders. Leadership from the top is key.**

“Daniel [the shop manager] is helping me look for work. It is difficult. I would rather work than volunteer.”

Embet, volunteer, Oxfam shop

### **The role of intermediary organisations**

All our case study organisations had benefited from the involvement of at least one external agency that put them in touch with refugees and asylum seekers wanting to volunteer. Some of these intermediary organisations were in the refugee sector, others might be adult education colleges, volunteer development centres or work placement agencies. They provided a range of support and advice to individual volunteers and the volunteering organisations, and often they maintained contact during a volunteer placement and after.

- 8. More organisations should take steps to facilitate the volunteering of refugees and people seeking asylum into non-refugee organisations. Existing good practice should be shared widely, through networks, seminars, publications and websites, and resourcing issues resolved.**

“You don’t get immediate quick wins – people are trapped in complex problems that many of us can’t begin to understand. This has to be recognised by funders. People have chaotic lives.”

Tom Flood, Chief Executive, BTCV

Ultimately, all volunteering and support organisations are potential intermediaries, sharing volunteers and building a pool of people willing to be active participants in British society whether they stay here for a limited period or the rest of their lives.

### **Volunteering and the world of work**

For most of the volunteers we interviewed, building a career in this country was a key motivation for volunteering. This included asylum seekers who are not allowed to work, but who hope for a positive decision on their case.

- 9. Steps need to be taken to ensure that volunteering provides the best experience for refugees and people seeking asylum wanting to return to work or to improve their employment opportunities. This includes strengthening links between volunteering organisations, colleges and potential employers. It also involves helping volunteers to have realistic expectations.**

Several interviewees expressed their concern that people who got jobs were often still employed below their skill level.

- 10. Senior managers must be made aware of the skills and work aspirations of volunteers, and the ways in which their volunteering experience adds to their potential as employees. This is particularly the case in the NHS and other large public sector bodies, where volunteers often aspire to find work.**

### **Offering worthwhile experience to all**

The fact that most people seeking asylum are not allowed to work means that volunteering can be of particular value to them. There are, however, risks that people may feel an obligation to volunteer – even that not volunteering may prejudice their asylum claim. There is also a risk that volunteer managers may pay less attention to the quality of experience they offer asylum seekers because they may be short-term volunteers or because they do not have permission to work.

- 11. Volunteering organisations must offer quality placements, whether or not someone’s long term motivation is to secure work, and regardless of whether they have permission to work.**



Volunteer,  
Oxfam shop, London.

“Volunteering could be given more emphasis among asylum seekers so they can have a kind of life they can enjoy.”

Vitty, volunteer, Maryhill CAB

### Volunteering by young refugees and asylum seekers

Young people are often keen to volunteer. However, young refugees and young people seeking asylum can face additional barriers, especially those who are here without adult relatives.

Some young refugees and asylum seekers have insufficient help in accessing volunteering due to gaps and deficiencies in existing support for young people. In the case studies, sometimes small sums of money could make a major difference to a young person’s ability to participate.

Young people often want to volunteer to help other young people and children: CRB requirements can then be a serious obstacle.

12. Extra steps should be taken to encourage and enable volunteering by young refugees and asylum seekers. Social workers, teachers and other advocates must take a more active role in enabling young refugees to volunteer. CRB procedures should be reviewed to ensure that young separated refugees are able to provide adequate documentation.



Volunteer, Actventure.